

Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery Oral History Project

Interview with Harlan Walker

Interviewer: Dr. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

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I = Interviewer

H = Harland Walker

Beginning of interview

I

So when did you start with the Oxford Symposium?

H

I used to be much involved, and still am in a way, in a society in Birmingham called the Buckland Club which dines twice a year on special themes. One of the themes we had was to do with the Middle East in Gloucestershire and somebody said you must get hold of Alan Davidson. He is the man you should talk to because he used to be the British ambassador in Laos (I think). So I got an introduction to Alan Davidson and he came to a party we had in Gloucestershire to do with that and he helped me to organise it. It was a Lao party and we invited every Lao in England. There were only about eighty or ninety of them and about forty of them came aged from sixty to two or less. So they all came down to this house we had borrowed in Gloucestershire to help us have this party. They all worked all night long. I went to bed at midnight and they were all sitting on the tables cross legged cutting up the next day's food. I went to bed and when I came down again at 6 o'clock they had not moved. They were still sitting on the tables, still preparing the meal for us all. That is how I got to know Alan. He and I became friends and I got involved with all kinds of projects to do with international food of one kind or another. So that's how I got to know him.

I

You were at the first symposium?

H

Oh Yes, that was the first one. Alan Davidson was the main person really. He and I had rank, nobody else and we would agree what we were going to do and then either one of us

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would do it or do something quite different. But we worked together and decided on our plan for each event.

I

So where were you born?

H

I was born in Birmingham in 1924. My mother is American and my father was English so I spent a fair bit of my childhood, a quarter or less in America

I

What part of America?

H

In Pennsylvania. I was there for one stretch for a whole year. I went to school there. My mother's family all live in America of course so I got to know a lot about American life as well.

I

And that was before the war?

H

Oh yes, that was around 1937.

I

And you were in the British Army?

H

Yes, in 1942 I became eighteen and joined the British Army.

I

And where were you posted?

H

First of all, I did training in England and then was sent to Italy and I was in Italy for the last year of the war which was great fun. Italy is lovely anyway and what they say about war is that it is 90% boredom and 5% fear. I did not get boredom because Italy is so wonderful to explore. It was a case of "Harlan, will you take 10 soldiers and take these 10 armoured cars

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and drive them to so and so", maybe two hundred miles away that I had never heard of and I had to do it on my own.

I

It was a great adventure.

H

Yes, lovely.

I

Then you spent a bit of time in Paris after that?

H

When I came out of the army which was in May or June and I was not going to the university until January so I had all that time to kill. I thought I was bad at languages but having spent all this time in Italy and then Greece I thought I was actually quite good at languages. I thought it was absurd that I had the belief that I cannot speak French. So at the beginning of 1947 I decided that I would really learn French. I went to Tour and I went to the Institute Touraine which was a school for foreigners. Normally it had about two hundred students and now it had six students. Myself and one girl were English, two were Scandinavians and I have forgotten what the others were! Usually there were a lot of people but it was immediately after the war. As there were only six students I got very good attention and we had a lot of fun. My teacher was also a teacher in a school for boys in the family I stayed with. They would tell me the terrible leg pulling they gave our particular teacher whom they found extremely boring and I found rather funny.

I

And what did you study...apart from French did you study French literature or was it just language?

H

It was spoken and written language. It was quite seriously done. We spent about six hours every day at it.

I

So then you went to University?

H

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Yes, I did. Oxford.

I

And what did you read there?

H

A thing called PPE – Politics, Philosophy and Economics which is the lazy man's degree.
(laugh) Perhaps not everybody would agree with that but that's what I think.

I

What did you do after that.? Did you move on to a postgrad?

H

No, I went from there to work in a company. That was my plan. I would work in industry. I applied for one or two jobs. I applied for one in particular and I liked the idea of it...a firm called J&P Coats which was a firm in Scotland who made sewing thread. They had an almost worldwide monopoly. Factories and things all over the world. I wanted to work somewhere where I would be all over the world where I could learn languages and experience different countries. So I worked for them for eight years I think, quite a long time anyway. During that time I got married.

I

And were you based in Scotland or London?

H

In a way you could say based in Scotland but I spent six months in Naples during that time, quite a lot of time in America. They were a worldwide company and for a variety of reasons they sent me on a number of different jobs all over the world.

I

And were you selling or managing or what were you doing?

H

Managing Sales.

I

So all that international travel exposed you to a lot of international food?

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H

I supposed it did but at that time I was not so much interested in food. I was interested in languages and travel. I do speak a few languages, not very many, two or three.

I

So you got married at this stage and where did you settle down?

H

We got married in Scotland because it was a Scottish firm and I spent quite a lot of time in Glasgow. I had a London friend who had a girlfriend. They rang me up from London and said Look, you ought to meet the other one's sister. They decided that I should meet her because they did not approve of an engagement she had got into. They thought Harlan might be able to fix this. So sure enough I went off and met this woman whom I ultimately married and loved dearly. It was altogether a great success.

I

And you had three children together, two boys and a girl?

H

Yes, boy, girl, boy.

I

So when did the dining club start?

H

That started in Birmingham and was called the Buckland Club. Named after Frank Buckland who was a 19th Century scientist, a naturalist really who had the ambition to eat food of every animal in Britain. So we named our dining club after him. Ours was a straightforward dining club. We dined twice a year and we always had some kind of theme. One would be on Hong Kong or something or maybe just on fishermen.

I

And who was in the club?

H

They were mostly Birmingham, mostly business people but also doctors, scientists and all sorts.

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I

So there was plenty of discussion and friendship

H

Oh, yes. There were about fifty members.

I

So you could say yourself and Alan Davidson were central to the Oxford Symposium for so long.

H

We started it really. Alan started it and then I got to know Alan and he said would I be the person who would organise it. And I did from the very beginning.

I

And you edited a lot of the proceedings as well for many years.

H

Yes, I did. We had written proceedings at the end of every meeting which was two meetings a year and I wrote the minutes.

I

And then they started to publish them in around 1988 and you became the editor.

H

Yes. I mean I was the only employee. I was the administrator, editor and everything.

I

Had you any involvement with Petits Propos Culinaires, PPC?

H

Yes, I was very involved with PPC, that was all mixed up in it too, all part of the same organisation really.

I

And had Tom Jane been involved from the beginning also?

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H

I don't think so, not to the same degree. To begin with it was literally Alan Davidson and me. The organisation just took place on the telephone from our houses. I lived in Birmingham, he lived in London.

I

So you planned over the phone and made all the arrangements, decided who you would invite and all that.

H

Yes, we did

I

Is there any memorable moments that you have or have there been so many?

H

Well, I would have to think about that for a bit. I could think of something I am sure but I can't just out of my head.

I

Well, that you so much for the interview and perhaps we can sit down again and record your most memorable moments.

End of interview